



Source: walkbiketoschool.org

Nine strategies cities use to prioritize safe, active travel for children and youth

CITIES STRIVE TO BE PLACES WHERE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THRIVE. How does this goal translate to prioritizing safe walking and biking in a real way? We asked city officials from the first six cities to receive the Vision Zero for Youth U.S. Leadership Award for their insights on what makes a difference. Nine common insights emerged:

1. Policies and plans set a strong foundation.

City officials told us that formally adopted policies and plans — like Vision Zero, Complete Streets, transportation equity, and Safe Routes to School action plans— are vital components to success. Some plans directly name youth as an important group to serve, and other plans offer the foundation that points towards a priority for youth. “We’ve implemented Vision Zero around schools and across the city in a bold and aggressive way, and part of our ability to do that was a strong policy foundation. We have a policy goal to increase kids walking and biking on a regular basis. We need to have safe routes to do that,” said one city official.

Formally adopted project prioritizations focused on crash risk and equity, both fundamental to

a Safe System approach. One city noted that “prioritization gave us cover for staying focused on the neediest schools,” while another observed that prioritization resulted in “benefiting not just those who had the resources to reach out and request help.” “School zone standards have helped with consistency. There are 80 schools ... and there was not consistency. This allows us to apply our recommended school zone traffic safety countermeasures more equitably but also in different contexts and different travel patterns.”

One observation that was shared is that sometimes cities don’t need more policies, they simply need to implement the ones that have already been adopted.

2. Speed management is a priority.

Slowing speeds is a key component to reducing deaths and injuries from crashes for people of all ages. Cities are placing a focus on reducing speeds where children and youth walk and bike. Some use speed cameras to enforce slower speeds and have found that automated enforcement has very few repeat offenders. Speed cameras in school zones are a start for some communities.

In 2016, **SEATTLE, WASHINGTON** made a big commitment to slowing speeds, reducing the citywide default speed from 25 to 20 mph on non-arterials and arterials from 30 to 25 mph. This speed limit policy changed the framework for setting speed limits from basing speed limits on 85th percentile speeds to setting them with safety as the goal. They increased the number of speed limit signs and found that the combination of reducing speed limits and increasing speed limit signs can prevent crashes. Those locations experienced a 22 percent reduction in crashes and a 54 percent reduction in drivers traveling 40+ mph. They installed speed humps in school zones based on school priority rankings. In addition, they placed 20 mph beacons at 100 schools and expanded photo enforcement focused on multi-lane roads near schools.¹

In 2014, **NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK** installed safety cameras at 140 locations in school zones. In a review of the first two years of data, the New York City Department of Transportation found an almost eight percent reduction in overall crashes, and a 15 percent reduction in injury crashes in locations with safety cameras. The greatest reduction was in injuries to pedestrians, which was just over 23 percent. In 2019, New York City was able to expand the safety camera program to place cameras within one quarter mile of schools, allowing the city to place them on some of the busier arterials, which are often more dangerous than the streets on which schools are located. Repeat offenses were very low, with only 19 percent of those who received a speed camera violation receiving a second violation.²

Source: Bruce Englehardt / CC-BY SA



3. Infrastructure improvements go beyond the school zone. Arterials are important, too.

Just as tackling speed requires looking at all the places where children walk and bike, the same is true for infrastructure improvements. The school zone can be a starting point for safety innovations but don't stop there. City officials gave us feedback like, "Look at places not just in front of schools," "students are not always going home," and "rethink the 'school zone;' all places should be safe, we shouldn't just give students a map of safe routes."

School travel standards can support looking beyond the school zone; Lincoln, Nebraska's School

Zone Standards report gives guidelines not just for school zones but also for identifying and treating "primary walking route networks" that serve the greatest number of students.

In addition to infrastructure improvements that slow speeds, there need to be safe places to walk and bike and cross the street along arterials. Fremont, California created a protected intersection at a high pedestrian volume intersection that served students, removing free right turn lanes and adding bike lanes.

4. Quick-build projects can bring lasting outcomes.

Quick-build projects are low-cost infrastructure improvements that can provide immediate safety benefits. Some projects, often called pop-ups, use temporary materials, and stay in place for just a few days. They are used to gain public support and feedback for needed improvements. Other projects use longer-lasting, low-cost materials installed for longer periods of time or semi-permanently. These get needed safety improvements in place much faster than traditional infrastructure projects.

Another benefit of quick-build projects is a lower cost compared to traditional infrastructure improvements. This can be a particular advantage in places that have limited or no resources set aside for school active travel projects.

Lincoln used a combination of low-cost strategies in their efforts, including creating capacity for city forces to install signage and markings, applying for



Source: L.A. DOT

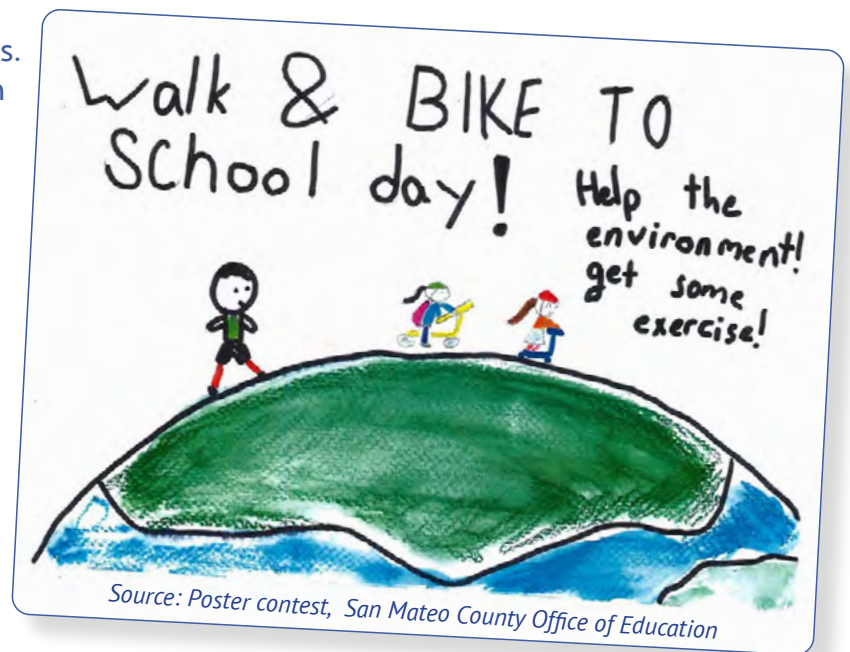
federal funds, and seeking opportunities to cost-share with planned construction near schools to make improvements.

FREMONT has installed hundreds of quick-build projects around its schools. In 2015, Fremont adopted a Vision Zero Plan, and the city then shared costs with the school district to conduct safety audits at 42 schools. Informed by the audits, the city installed 400 low-cost safety improvement projects, such as "paint and plastic" bulb-outs, curb extensions, and new signage, all in the \$1,000 to \$5,000 range. From 2016 to 2018, Fremont saw a 38 percent reduction in crashes involving pedestrians and a 92 percent reduction in crashes involving pedestrians under 16 years of age.³

5. Frame solutions to show how they help address multiple issues – like health, climate change, and housing – that are important to community members.

Connecting with issues that resonate for the public helps sustain and deepen commitments. For instance, cities recognize the link between the need to reduce emissions and improving options for non-motorized transportation. One city noted that there's a "holistic consideration of projects – public health, climate, micromobility."

Seattle's 2022 Executive Order on Climate Justice included expansion of School Streets and ensuring an "all ages and abilities bicycling facility" for every public school among its action items.⁴ Fremont's climate action plan released in 2023, "Climate Ready Fremont," included Safe Routes to School in its actions towards reaching its goal of "Clean and Multimodal Mobility and Connectivity". The plan also notes the importance of low-stress bicycle networks and Complete Streets, linking them to addressing the needs of many groups including children.⁵



6. Strong partnerships inside and out are crucial.

- Officials talked about the need to build buy-in and partnerships within their departments and with external partners. One city noted the value of coordination between the traffic engineering team and the street maintenance team: "The street maintenance team has been great partners in making the projects better. For example, they know about new materials, especially for low-cost projects."
- One city partnered with its school district through a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) that helped "institutionalize the practice of having relationships with them" and has evolved over time to being less focused on the MOU and more focused on the trust that's been created.
- Another city had regular meetings between the city council and school board, which helped keep "the issue [of road safety] as a top priority. Efforts to calm traffic can generate complaints to Council members, but when they get regular reinforcement about continuing to improve safety for kids from the school board, it keeps the council grounded in staying the course."
- Another city has standing meetings to plan for the future with a cross-section of partners including the school district, public works, parks and recreation, libraries, YMCA, and the planning department. Advocacy groups are valued partners who "come to council meetings to defend and support."
- Another city had more active involvement, co-developing a SRTS strategic plan with its statewide biking advocacy organization and school district.

7. Public involvement and youth engagement play important roles.

Cities showed that public involvement can be many things. All of them good. It is listening to what concerns neighborhoods, such as speeding or unsafe crossings, and what they see as the root problems. It is also showing neighborhoods solutions through pop-up events and quick-build projects. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, community workshops with students, school staff, teachers, parents, and other partners identified priorities for infrastructure safety improvements. Groups at the workshops were given a budget and information on potential treatments and asked how they would redesign the streets around their school. Neighborhoods also mobilized to advocate for change, such as lower speed limits.

Youth are key changemakers. They are working with transportation departments, their communities, and schools to advocate for policy change, generate community support for slowing traffic, (especially around schools), and much more.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA has used hay bales, paint, and other low-cost materials for pop-up demonstration events pioneered by the city's Safe Routes to School Program. These events helped communities quickly experience and understand future quick-build and/or infrastructure changes recommended in school neighborhood improvement plans developed for the "Top 50 schools" – the schools in Los Angeles identified with the most need for improved safety conditions. These pop-up events build community awareness, approval, and feedback before hard dollars are spent on installation. A Los Angeles city official said, "Doing outreach on plan reviews ... we miss the boat with community members versus when we put it out on the street and they experience it." The official added that it also helped build a culture of "we do innovative things."

8. A system for serving disadvantaged communities is central to everything.

Low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic communities are disproportionately represented in pedestrian crashes. Years of disinvestment have led to lack of infrastructure and high speeds, making walking unsafe for many communities. Cities have used prioritization criteria and policies to center the needs of disadvantaged communities firmly into their transportation improvement plans, policies and activities.



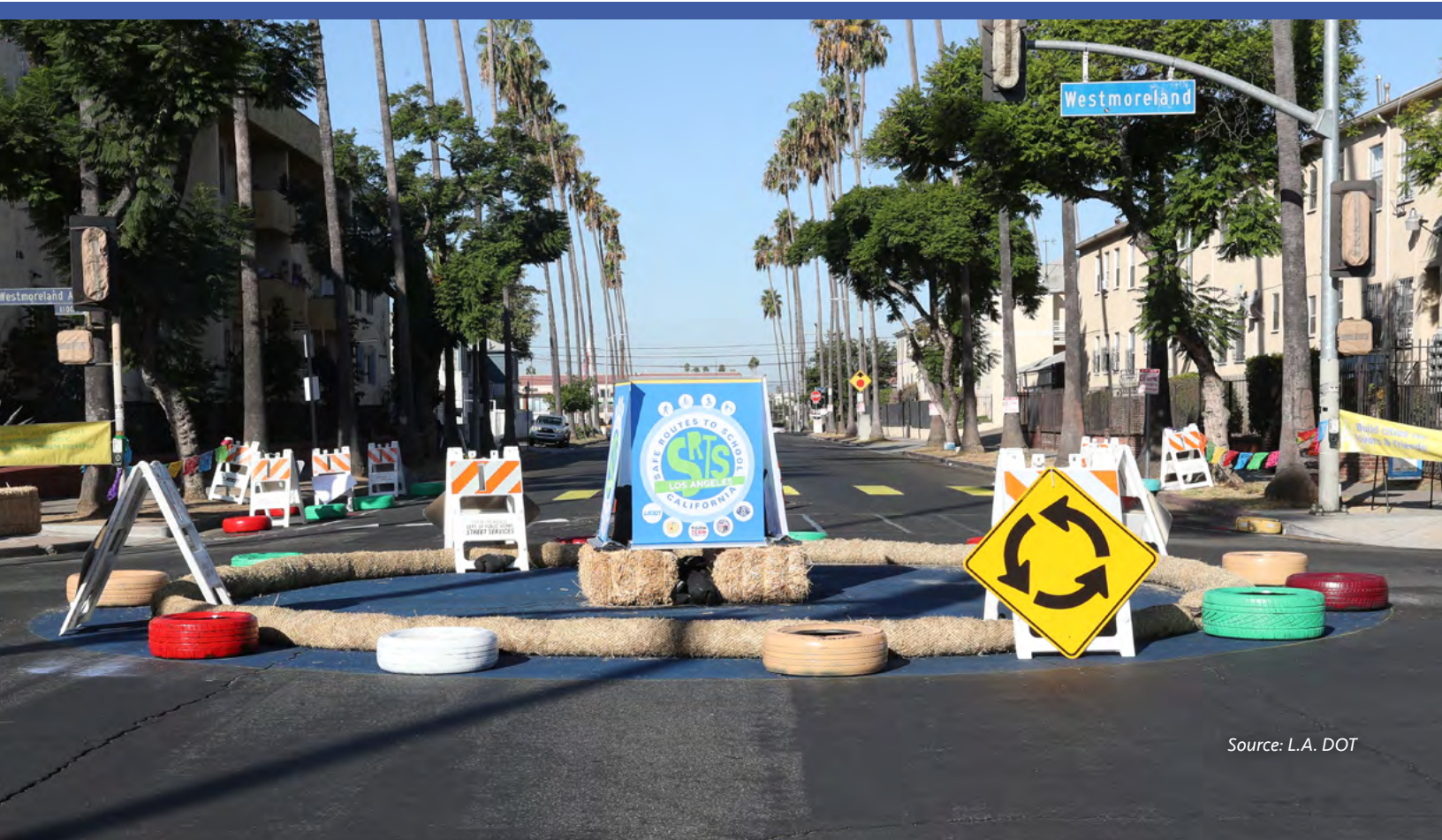
Seattle conducted a two-year equity analysis of its Safe Routes to School program by engaging families and using community-based focus groups and community events. Responses informed the update to the "Safe Routes to School 5 Year Action Plan," emphasizing resources and program support towards communities with the greatest needs.

The City of **MILWAUKEE** references its 2019 resolution "to take actions on achieving racial equity and transforming systems of racism that impact the health and well-being of the community." The resolution articulated several strategies to address health equity issues, including policy changes and initiatives (where Safe Routes to School fits).⁶ In 2020 the Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan aimed to revise and align youth education and school infrastructure projects with the city's commitment to the social and racial justice movement. A significant component of the plan was a set of criteria to allocate infrastructure investments where they are most needed.⁷

9. Be creative and seize opportunities.

Creativity and opportunism are catalysts for many successful projects. Cities use innovation to solve problems, adapt to change, and sometimes find the good that can come out of tough times.

- Fremont wanted to increase its application of quick-build projects to make more school zones safer. So the city partnered with schools to conduct assessments and then implemented low-cost improvements at priority places.
- Lincoln wanted to do the most possible with a small amount of funding. For example, while reduction of roadway width helps slow traffic, it is expensive to do. So, they extended bike lanes and utilized temporary curbing as an alternative to reconstructing the curb line. Lincoln had no dedicated funding for school zone improvements, so city leaders looked at planned construction adjacent to schools to do some cost-sharing with those projects.
- New York City wanted public support for speed cameras in school zones. So, they partnered with the Vision Zero Youth Council who provided the youth voice so valuable in creating public support for passage of the speed safety camera bill.
- The Los Angeles Safe Routes to School Program wanted communities to see them as supportive and innovative in creating safer streets around schools. What resulted was the launch of the pop-up events with hay bales and paint to inform quick build projects with materials that would last one to six years (image below).



Source: Seattle DOT



- Seattle wanted to encourage physical activity when COVID-19 prevention measures shut down many options. The city launched Healthy Streets and School Streets, which are open for people walking, rolling, biking, and playing and closed to pass-through traffic. Many Healthy Streets have been made permanent and participation in the School Streets program continues to grow in 2024 (image above).
- Milwaukee did not want important work to stop during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the city found creative, community-driven approaches to conduct neighborhood planning workshops outdoors (image to right). Program organizers also modified bicycle programs and enabled teachers to go for bike rides with students even when the students were learning from home.



Cities across the country face competing demands for resources and attention. These cities leveraged current events, shared priorities, and a focus on ending traffic deaths to center the needs of children and youth, and communities as a whole.

To read case studies about each of the cities interviewed, visit www.visionzeroforyouth.org/awards/us.

To learn more about Vision Zero for youth, visit www.visionzeroforyouth.org.

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¹ Marchetti, L., March, K., & Pullen-Seufert, N. (2023). *Seattle Models Strategies for Equitably Advancing Safe Walking and Biking for Youth*. https://www.pedbikeinfo.org/resources/resources_details.cfm?id=5370

² National Center for Safe Routes to School Vision Zero for Youth. (2020). *New York City Takes Multi-Faceted Approach to Protecting Youth*. <https://www.visionzeroforyouth.org/stories/new-york-city-ny/>

³ National Center for Safe Routes to School Vision Zero for Youth. (2021). *Fremont, CA: A Community Focus on Crash Reductions Pays Off*. <https://www.visionzeroforyouth.org/stories/fremont-ca/>

⁴ City of Seattle. Executive Order 2022-07: One Seattle Climate Justice Actions to Reduce Emissions from the Transportation Sector. (2022, December 7). <https://clerk.seattle.gov/search/clerk-files/322556>

⁵ City of Fremont. (2023). *Climate Ready Fremont*. <https://www.fremont.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/13269/638203685947770000>

⁶ City of Milwaukee. Substitute resolution committing the City of Milwaukee to take actions toward achieving racial equity and transforming the systems and institutions of racism that impact the health and well-being of the community. (2019, June 18). <https://milwaukee.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3926601&GUID=5309EB39-5CC1-4E82-AB5E-C47BD94B6B69&FullText=1>

⁷ Toole Design & Wisconsin Bike Fed. (2021). *City of Milwaukee Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan*. <https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/cityBikePed/2021-Images/Safe-Routes-to-School/SafeRoutestoSchoolStrategicPlan.pdf>